

“This is a frontal assault on the working class, the faculty and the students”

# Students speak out against the attack on public education and culture at West Virginia University

Aaron Edwards  
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Anger is growing on the campus of West Virginia University (WVU) after the administration, led by university President E. Gordon Gee, announced sweeping cuts to multiple graduate and undergraduate programs. In response to the announcement of the proposed slashing of 169 full-time faculty positions and 39 academic majors (9 percent), hundreds of students quickly organized a campus protest on August 21. More protests by faculty and students are scheduled for September 6.

Particularly targeted are the World Languages department and programs in linguistics, literature and creative writing. If the cuts are implemented, they would impact the entire state, including K-12 public education. WVU supplies the state’s public schools with foreign language teachers and is the only R1 research university in West Virginia.

While the administration claims that only 7 percent of faculty and 2 percent of students will be affected by the cuts, this does not take into account not having the graduate students available to teach required courses for freshman students. The cuts, which are set to be finalized on September 15, will also slash the entire mathematics PhD program, the only one in the state.

Moreover, far-reaching cuts have already been underway and more are yet to come. This was underscored by Penny, a graduate student who told the *World Socialist Web Site* that several faculty have left her department since 2017 without being replaced. During her degree program, there were several periods when she had no certainty as to whether or not she and her fellows could access their funding, which had already been secured for them. Her program is in fact not currently under review for the sweeping cuts.

However, Penny had a class, she was scheduled to teach this semester, get canceled with less than a week’s notice because the guidelines for the minimum number of students had more than doubled with no prior notice.

After going through this ordeal, including the work that went into preparing for the canceled class and the loss of \$6,000 income, she was offered to teach the class later for considerably less pay: “I was completely gobsmacked ... verbatim I said to [the administrator] that the value of my labor does not diminish just because the university does not know how to budget.”

She explained about the planned cuts:

None of us knew how bad it was until the RIF [reduction in force] information came out in July. We knew that there were

budget issues, you hear that all the time. The budget gets tight, and you have to cut here and cut there. That was not new information. What was new was just how dire the situation was. They were removing printers from the grad offices. For a while there, some of us were not even sure we were going to get the remainder of our research funding.

I know among the grad students we are pissed off. We feel that we have more of an ability to speak out than our faculty does. They asked the faculty to sign, at the beginning of the semester, the WVU values, I don’t know what to call it, like “we will support the university,” essentially a very soft gag order. That is why I think it is really important that people realize that the walkout was organized by the undergrad students in less than a week. We had a massive turnout for that. They know and recognize that the faculty can’t speak out the same way that they can.

Penny connected the struggle at WVU to the attack on public education across the US, recalling the experience of the 2018 West Virginia teachers’ strike:

Nationally we are seeing education being defunded. We are seeing it on a grander scale, a louder scale here in West Virginia because it is such a huge deficit. It is astronomical compared to other universities right now. But this is going to be the trend. In order to keep a class controlled, you must keep it uneducated. Look at the response to the 2018 teachers’ strike. My kids had to be out of school for two or three weeks. And then one of the first degrees to be cut was the Master’s in secondary education and the PhD in education. ... I feel like this is all part of a much bigger issue that is aimed at keeping poor people poor and compliant.

The attack on education at WVU is being spearheaded by President Gee, who is paid a bloated salary of just over \$800,000 per year. Referencing the exorbitant salaries of President Gee and other members of the university administration, Penny added, “I don’t think it’s fair that the people who are making \$800,000, \$400,000, \$300,000 a year aren’t

taking a pay cut because it would ‘hurt their morale,’ which, if you didn’t know, is an actual statement that was made.”

Zach, a member of the West Virginia United student union and the Campus Workers Union which organized the protests and are affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), also spoke with the WSWS about the cuts:

A lot of faculty and staff are being bullied around here in my department. They are eliminating the graduate teachers assistance program because of the budget cuts. Another student in our program had to leave because he could not afford to stay without the job. These cuts don’t impact me directly, but I’m a lifelong resident of Morgantown, and I did my graduate studies here, and this is hurting the entire community.

The threatened destruction of the World Languages department would undermine education in many fields that have foreign language credits as a prerequisite. Zach said, “The university is now saying they will only be teaching Spanish and Mandarin. This is ridiculous for a land grant university. They are removing all the other languages and telling students that they can take Zoom classes or learn by using an app.”

At the same time, Zach noted, the university has cracked down against all faculty who are still taking COVID-19 precautions and are not allowing them to present classes over Zoom.

This is the continual frontal assault going on against those in the working class, the faculty and, of course, the students. It is part of the cultural assault going on throughout the country. This is one front on the attack on academic freedom that you see going on in Georgia and Florida. They try to present universities as left-leaning, but in reality the administration attacks free speech. People who speak out in support of Palestinians are labeled antisemitic.

At the same time, they welcome right-wing people who not only spout off their nonsense but incite violence against others. This is another reason why the World Languages program is under attack. They have always been a welcoming space and created a welcoming environment for international students; and they create exchange programs for American students; and they create programs in which students learn about each other. The administration claims to be transparent, but the faculty I’ve spoken to say that they are not telling the truth about their departments.

When asked about the war in Ukraine and the billions of dollars being spent by the Biden administration for the military, Zach responded:

In the wealthiest country in the world, you shouldn’t have the unhoused, hungry and people living without healthcare. Both parties approve record military budgets but oppose spending anything on social programs. When the war started in the Ukraine, the university created an atmosphere to prevent any kind of critical or even nuanced thinking about the war, about the conflict.

The attack on education and culture underway at West Virginia University cannot be separated from the drive toward a new imperialist

world war. While funding a bloody war in the Ukraine, which the US has provoked for many years, the Biden administration is proposing a \$1 trillion war budget. At the same time, the Biden administration claims there is “no money” to ease the pain inflicted by spiraling inflation, which hits the most impoverished communities and areas such as West Virginia the hardest.

Behind the aggressive attacks on education and culture at West Virginia University lies a class strategy of the American ruling class: In order to prepare for an imperialist world war, all resources of society must be diverted to the war effort, and the democratic, social and cultural rights of workers must be suppressed.

Students and workers at West Virginia University must counterpose their own class strategy to these attacks. In this fight, they must place no confidence in the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which is trying to co-opt their struggle at WVU. The AFT has sold out countless strikes in recent years and decades and played a central role in shutting down the 2018 West Virginia teachers’ strike. Time and again, it has sought to channel the growing militancy and discontent among educators back behind the Democratic Party and has helped enforce the policies of the ruling class of war at home and war abroad.

Instead, students and workers must turn to auto, UPS and other sections of the working class who are now entering struggle in the US and internationally and are engaged in a rank-and-file rebellion against the union bureaucracies. In the US the strike of 11,000 film and television writers and 65,000 actors is a fight for their livelihoods, and their struggle, like that of the students and academic workers, has profound implications for the level of cultural life in the US and internationally.

On September 14, contracts covering 150,000 United Auto Workers will expire for US workers at the Detroit Three automakers (Ford, GM, and Stellantis), and at the same time contracts for 20,000 workers at the same companies across the border in Canada will also expire.

This is the social force that students, young people and academic workers must turn to in an internationally coordinated fight against imperialist war and for the social and cultural rights of the working class. We urge all students, workers and alumni at WVU who want to speak out about the cuts and discuss this political perspective to contact the IYSSE and take up the fight to form an independent rank-and-file committee to organize and coordinate their struggle as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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